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Kenneth D. Farrow

Humor, Logic, Imagery and Sources  
in the Prose Writings of John Knox



"Yf we enterlase merynes with earnest materis, pardon us" says Knox to the "good readers" of his *Historie of the Reformatioun*.<sup>1</sup> Anyone familiar with the works of the Scottish "makars" will recognize a distinctly Henrysonian ring about that phrase, for as Henryson observes in the prologue to his *Morall Fabillis*: "clerkis sayis, it is richt profitabill / Amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport."<sup>2</sup> The similarities between Knox and the poet provide matter for criticism to which I shall briefly return, but to begin, what I want to concentrate on is the positively homiletic functions of humor. Henryson knew its value in this respect, and so, apparently, did John Knox.

Knox's humor, at least as it occurs in *The Historie*, would have little or no self-evident homiletic worth, were it not for a certain property which often accompanies its use; namely, an almost apologetic self-consciousness, and I think one can sense this coming through even in the short sentence I have already quoted. Often, at key points, Knox suddenly seems to become aware of the vigor, pace or vivacity of his narrative, and it is this

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<sup>1</sup>*The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1846-64), I, 145.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Henryson, *The Poems*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1987), "The Prologue," p. 3, l. 20.

momentary awareness from which he engenders, then mobilizes, his preaching skills.

This is relatively easy to illustrate by considering one of the more famous incidents recorded in *The Historie*, (although before going any further it is worth stressing, and I have said this often, that from the point of view of literary criticism, Knox's works have been poorly represented by those who quote continually only the "best bit," as a quick glance at many textbooks will confirm. This, indeed, is a practice which ought to be extirpated, and I intend to make as few concessions to vulgar preconceptions as I possibly can). This said, however, the episode I have in mind will be immediately recognizable. As a galley slave in 1548, Knox either witnessed, or was the chief participant in, what he calls "a meary fact" (Laing I, 227, fn. 3). After the arrival of the galleys at Nantes:

a glorious painted Lady was brought in to be kissed, and, amongis otheris, was presented to ane of the Scottishmen then cheyned. He gentillye said, "Truble me nott; such an idole is accursed; and tharefoir I will not tuich it." The Patron and the Arguesyn, with two officieris, having the cheaf charge of all such materis, said, "Thow salt handill it;" and so thei violentlie thrust it to his face, and putt it betwix his handis; who seing the extremitie, tooke the idole, and advisitlie looking about, he caist it in the rivare, and said, "Lett our Lady now saif hir self: sche is lycht aneuch; lett hir learne to swyme." After that was no Scottish man urged with that idolatrie (Laing I, 227).

The humor here draws its dynamic, perhaps, from the fact that it illustrates a peculiarly Scottish hard-headedness, not without a pervasive sense of exultation; the same hard-headedness which rather perversely manifests itself earlier in the narrative when the Protestant slaves condescend to hear Mass every day with one necessary stipulation: that "thei mycht stick the preastis" (Laing I, 226). But there is more than just a pervasive backdrop to the narrative.

I have chosen to reserve Knox's use of source material for later discussion, but it is not inappropriate here to suggest that there are probably echoes of Judges 6:31. If I may quote the relevant passage from Miles Coverdale's Bible of 1535: "But Joas sayde vnto them that stode by him: Wyl ye stryve for Baal? He yat stryveth for him shal dye this mornynge. Yf he be God, let him avenge himself, because his altare is broken downe."<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that the dialogue of the recalcitrant Scotsman in the narrative: "Lett our Lady now saif hir self, sche is lycht aneuch" is at least reminiscent, and a common theme, that of the impotence of false gods, lends

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<sup>3</sup>See Pierre Janton, *John Knox (ca. 1513-1572): L'Homme et L'Oeuvre* (Paris, 1967), p. 463, fn. 166.

the humor its cutting edge. The same apparently accommodating simplicity characterizes the speech of both "Joas(h)" and the Scots galley slave, and the vaguely scriptural antecedents must surely have carried some weight with Knox's original readers.

But if dialogue is important to the humor, shrewdly observed incidental details are even more so. Knox chooses his language carefully, and he was usually alert to nuances of expression. For instance, we get a particularly striking insight into the mechanics of his compositional process, and, incidentally, a memorable testimony to "Knox the humanist," in his *Letter of Wholesome Counsel*, written in 1556.<sup>4</sup> "Multiplication of wordes, prolixet interpretationes and wilfulnesse in reasonyng, is to be avoyded at all tymes, and in all places. . ." (Laing IV, 138). It is with this in mind that we should analyze his vocabulary.

First of all, Knox observes that the icon is "glorious." She meets, however, a particularly "inglorious" fate, and perhaps this *implicit* contrast was not far from the author's mind. *Vainglory*, after all, has always been a favorite topic of Scottish preachers. A phrase like "amongis otheris" may only strike us as commonplace and in passing, but in fact it is a detail which renders the individual in question all the more singular insofar as only he reacts in such a fashion. Similarly, an item like "gentillye" may not seem all that important, but, in conjunction with two other adverbs, "violentlie" and "advisitlie," it serves to highlight or foreground the putative brutality of the French convict-warders, and to characterize the prisoner. As Pierre Janton, the author of *John Knox: L'Homme et L'Oeuvre*, observes in a short paper on Knox presented to a Conference in Strasbourg in 1978, Knox's rhetoric is both "a war-machine to crush 'the Adversary' and a protective bulwark".<sup>5</sup> The humor, however, again emerges from contrast; this time between the exaggeratedly casual action of the Scot and the heavy-handed behavior of his enemies. But the most richly humorous moment in the whole narrative comes with the phrase "advisitlie looking about." It is the visual suggestiveness here, aided perhaps by just a trace of incongruity, that impresses us. Knox, indeed, was a master of the *mot*

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<sup>4</sup>See also C. S. Lewis, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 197.

<sup>5</sup>Pierre Janton, "John Knox and Literature," in *Actes du 2e Colloque de Langue et Littérature Ecossaises Moyen Age et Renaissance*, eds. Jean-Jaques Blanchot and Claude Graf (Strasbourg, 1978), p. 428.

*juste*, as other equally memorable moments in his work testify.<sup>6</sup> The carefully realized understatement of "After that was no Scotische man urged with that idolatrie" consummates the episode with an admirable economy.

I said earlier that, at certain moments, "Knox the narrator" becomes self-conscious, and then "Knox the preacher" takes over. If we read on from this narrative in *The Historie* we can see how this happens, as Knox begins to fashion what can only be described as a sort of miniature *moralitas*. "Yf we do rychtly consider," he adds, these things "expresse the same obedience that God requyred of his people Israell, when that thei should be caryed to Babylon" (Laing I, 227-228), and it is interesting that he cites not Judges 6:31, but Jeremiah 10:11, as substantiation of this point. But it is the sustained impact of his humor which allows us to warm to these more somber observations.

Competent and subtle narrative techniques again occur in the second humorous narrative I have chosen, also from *The Historie*. It relates to the early 1530s and concerns William Arth, a Friar who had evidently become dissatisfied with the moral conduct of the clergy, and who preached some critical sermons at St. Andrews. Four of these, as recounted by Knox, who was perhaps a member of the original audience,<sup>7</sup> occur in *The Historie*, and thus we are privileged to encounter a curious intermingling of two narratorial personalities in the dual presence of Knox and Arth. Knox tells how, at "Dunfermling," the Friar previously:

... came to a house whair gossopis were drynking thair Soundayis penny, and he, being dry, asked drynk. "Yis, Father, (said one of the gossopes) ye shall haif drynk; bot ye mon first resolve anc doubt which is rissen amongis us, to witt, What servand will serve a man beast on least expenssis." "The Good Angell, (said I,) who is manis keaper, who maikis great service without expenssis". "Tush, (said the gossope,) we meane no so heigh materis: we mean, What honest man will do greatest service for least expensses?" And whill I was musing, (said the Frear,) what that should mean, he said, "I see, Father, that the greatest clerkis ar not the wysest men." (Laing I, 39).

The first two lines from "came . . . asked drynk" may be Knox's, although he is probably using Arth's information, if not his exact words. The parenthetical phrase ("said I") must, however, be Arth's, although ("said the Frear") obviously belongs to Knox, while ("said ane of the gossopes") could

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<sup>6</sup>See for example the "Patrick Hepburn" narrative in Laing I, 40-1. Hepburn, a libidinous Prelate's peer, is pictured "macking it veray nyce for a lytill space" before confessing to manifest acts of adultery.

<sup>7</sup>W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God* (New York, 1974), p. 17.

possibly be that of either narrator. I am not convinced that Knox is deliberately teasing his readers, but we are left with a sense of the intriguing artistic possibilities of narrative.

More deliberately skillful are the subtly worked, tongue-in-cheek intellectual confrontations and the deft characterization. Arth's initial response, for example, "the Good Angel . . .," has a sort of ready-made seriousness about it which is not quite convincing, almost as if he were anticipating an ulterior motive behind the question. The "gossop's" quick impatience manifests itself through his dismissal of such "heigh" (by which he presumably means theological) "materis," before he ridicules Arth and the bishops by observing, perhaps with his deep suspicions fulfilled, that "the greatest clerks ar not the wisest men." There may of course be an echo of Henryson's *Parliament of Fourfuttit Beastis*,<sup>8</sup> or even Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale*<sup>9</sup> or simply an independent instance of a popular oral proverb,<sup>10</sup> but its use is naturally and spontaneously humorous. It is one of my contentions that the true literary value of Knox's *Historie* comes across, not in his great rhetorical broadsides such as those we encounter during, and after, his account of Cardinal Beaton's murder, but at quieter moments like this.

I hope it is not impertinent to suggest that historians will find little to satisfy them here, and the same can be said for theologians. But for the third category of scholar to whom Knox's works call, and according to C.S. Lewis, the one which has the slightest claim to them,<sup>11</sup> the literary critics, this is surely first rate material. In fact, despite Lewis's remarks, it is perhaps the literary critics who can lay fair claim to the largest part of Knox's canon. Historians, in general, seem to have little time for anything but *The Historie*, unless they are writing a biography, while theologians, like Richard Greaves, can almost ignore this work totally, preferring to concentrate on Knox's public admonitory writings, doctrinal texts and, to a lesser extent, his personal correspondence.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Henryson, p. 44, l. 1064.

<sup>9</sup>*The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn. Eds. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson (Oxford, 1988), p. 80, ll. 4054-5.

<sup>10</sup>See Morris Palmer Tilley, ed., *A Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Ann Arbor, 1950), C. 409; first recorded in Caxton's *Reynard* in 1481.

<sup>11</sup>See Lewis, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup>See Richard L. Greaves, *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation*:

It is a rare thing for any one scholar to unite all three skills, and this is what makes Pierre Janton so remarkable, and indeed, writing in his capacity as a literary critic, with *The Historie* in mind, he observes: "I wonder if one could find as stimulating and as attractive a third in Dryden's or Johnson's works, not to mention more celebrated syllabus authors, who are often read but seldom enjoyed."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps one can better appreciate why *The Historie* is enjoyable by considering anecdotes such as those I have just discussed.

However, I am not suggesting that Knox's humor is exclusively anecdotal or even that it is confined solely to his *magnum opus*. There are one or two moments at least in the remainder of his writings which are both memorable and humorous, although it should be emphasized that, comparatively speaking, these are rare. For instance, in his *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* we find the following:

In the Papistical Masse, the congregation getteth nothing except the beholding of your jukingis, noddngis, crossingis, turnyng, uplifting, whilk all ar nothing but a diabollical prophanation of Chrystis Supper. Now juke, cross and nod as ye list, thai ar but your awin inventionis. And finallie, Brethren, ye gat nothing, but gaseit and beheld whill that ane did eat and drink all (Laing III, 67).

This, perhaps, is more typical of Knox's humor in that it is scathing and highly derisory, although we should bear in mind that the world of sixteenth century religious controversy was a hostile one. In an essay entitled "The Prose of John Knox: A Re-assessment," Professor R.D.S. Jack argues that much of the humor derives from "colloquial description" in conjunction with "a number of Scotticisms."<sup>14</sup> These remarks are broadly justifiable as the Laing text stands, but one should be wary of attributing the latter effects, at least, to Knox.

It is not my intention here to enter into the tricky "Scots / English" controversy surrounding Knox's work, and for two reasons. I have dealt with it elsewhere and, in any case, far too much attention has, for dubious reasons, been paid to it. But a thorough examination of the original edition of *A Vindication*, probably printed at Wesel by Hugh Singleton (available on S.T.C. 15066, Reel 442), indicates that the Scottish orthography was probably introduced by an unknown scribe into the so-called M'Crie MS of 1603, which formed the basis of Laing's version. It all de-

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*Studies in the Thought of John Knox* (Grand Rapids, 1980).

<sup>13</sup>Janton, "John Knox and Literature," p. 423.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald D. S. Jack, "The Prose of John Knox: A Re-assessment," *Prose Studies*, 4 (1981), pp. 239-51.

pend on what MSS or editions the scribe himself had before him. In some instances (but not always) we know that he had Knox's codices, yet without the guarantee that the scribe *did* preserve the orthography, in those cases where he *had* unique originals.

But this much is to digress. Professor Jack, however, is right to focus on the description, which achieves its effect through a "list of nouns," (gerunds, or verbal nouns, to be more precise) and these are transformed into present tense intransitive verbs to sustain and reinforce the humor. In terms of sixteenth century rhetoric as it is outlined in such books as Philip Melanchthon's *Institutiones Rhetoricae* or Leonard Coxe's *The Arte or Crafte of Rhetorycke*, this transformation would constitute *polyptoton*, whereby items are repeated with slightly different inflections. But Knox's mockery is at its most caustic when he ridicules what he sees as the ineffectual nature of the Mass as a sacrament, by pointing out one of the rather more banal results of its administration; being "gaseit." As Francis M. Higman observes in his study *The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises*, the French Reformer reduces the ceremony "to a snack"<sup>15</sup> and Knox's intentions are obviously the same. He even adds the suggestion that it is nothing more than an empty spectacle when he mentions how the other participants "*beheld* whill one did eat and drink." The whole passage, in fact, makes use of *abominatio*; according to Melanchthon, a sub-species of *exclamatio*.

Directly in line with the humor of *A Vindication* is that of a short passage contained in the preface to *The Ressoning which was betwix the Abbate of Crosraguell and John Knox, in Mayboill concerning the Masse . . .* This time he vigorously and overtly attacks the status of the Host. Bread, he says, is not literally the body of Christ, but, in fact, a meal for mice:

Bot O then, what becometh of Christes natural bodie? By myrackle, it flies to the heaven againe, if the Papistes teach treulie, for how sone soever the mouse takes hold, so sone flieth Christ away, and letteth her gnaw the bread. A bold and puissant mouse, but a feeble and miserable god . . . (Laing VI, 172-3).

Knox combines a rhetorical question with an affected naivete, and bold, wittily conceived analogy with careful climactic balance, to produce what is probably the most memorable literary moment of the whole contest.<sup>16</sup> This is swift, devastating surgery, but so immensely rich are Knox's works

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<sup>15</sup>Francis M. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises* (London, 1967), p. 173.

<sup>16</sup>See also Janton, *L'Homme et L'Oeuvre*, p. 495.



with such rhetorical treasures that many of them have been overlooked, perhaps because they represent simply, the "norm."

If Knox's use of rhetoric subtly enhances his humor, the same can be said for its effect on his argumentation, specifically the process of logical reasoning which we so frequently meet in the body of his prose, and this brings me on to my second topic. It is, of course, widely acknowledged that Knox is among the most "logical" of writers, probably because of the Aristotelian scholasticism which he imbibed as a student of John Major at St. Andrews.

We can see these two distinct facets, rhetoric and logic, interfacing in nearly all of his writings, even occasionally in *The Historie*, although it must be admitted that he is recalling an oral debate on Church ceremonies between himself and two opponents, which actually took place in 1547. During this debate, one of his antagonists, the Catholic Friar Alexander Arbuckle, cited 1 Corinthians 3:11 in defense of orthodoxy and provoked the following response from a young Knox (although the older Knox, who wrote the narrative account in his *Historie* nearly twenty years later, may have touched things up just a little, but in balance, and to be fair to the Reformer, this seems unlikely). After a pious introduction, he responds:

Now to your argument. The Ceremonies of the Kirk, (say ye,) ar gold, silver, and pretious stonis, because thei ar able to abyde the fyre; but, I wold learne of yow, what fyre is it which your Ceremonies does abyde? And in the meantyme, till that ye be advised to answer, I will schaw my mynd, and make ane argument against youris, upoun the same text. And first, I say, that I have heard this text adduced, for a pruf of Purgatorie; but for defence of Ceremonies, I never heard, nor yitt red it. But omitting whetther ye understand the mynd of the Apostill or nott, I maik my argument, and say, That which may abyde the fyre, may abyde the word of God: But your Ceremonies may not abyde the word of God: *Ergo*, Thei may not abyde the fyre; and yf they may not abyde the fyre, then ar they not gold, silver, nor precious stones. Now, yf ye find any ambiguitie in this terme, Fyre, which I interpret to be the woord, fynd ye me ane other fyre, by the which thingis buylded upoun Christ Jesus should be tryed then God and his woord, which both in the Scriptures ar called fyre, and I shall correct my argument (Laing I, 198).

This passage contains two functional instances of the rhetorical device *reditus ad propositum* or neat returns to a main theme after a digression, such as we find in Knox's brief discussion of purgatory.<sup>17</sup> They occur with the phrases "Now to your argument" and "but omitting . . . ." I say

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<sup>17</sup>An example of such an argument can be found in *Hamilton's Catechism*, ed. Alexander Ferrier Mitchell (Edinburgh, 1882), p. cciii: "And the wark of ilk man, quhat it is ye fyre sall frie or prief . . . Quha sa will consider diligently this auctoritie of S. Paule, he sall esely find purgatory to be efter yis lyfe."

"functional uses" because they are necessary to facilitate the logistic process, which of course relies heavily on the use of syllogism. Here, Knox employs a three-step categorical *sylogism in baroco* ("That which . . . precious stones"); that is to say, a syllogism in which the major premise is a universal affirmative, the minor a particular negative and the conclusion, similarly, a particular negative.

Admittedly, some of these methods have previously been identified by Professor Janton,<sup>18</sup> but not to be out-done by our learned French predecessor, this study has at least something new to offer. The remainder of the passage, from "now yf . . . argument," entails a careful and apparently spontaneous manipulation of scriptural semiotics. For his own definition of "fyre" around which the whole argument revolves, Knox probably thought of Jeremiah 20:9: "ye word of the Lord was a verray burning fire in my heart" (Coverdale) or 23:29 "Is not my worde like a fire sayeth the Lord" (Great Bible). The definition of God Himself as fire has many more possible sources such as Deuteronomy 4:24, Psalms 18:12, Ezekiel 1:4, Revelation 1:14 and so forth, but it is undeniable that Knox's disputative techniques converge to produce a masterpiece of intelligent and lucid, deliberative rhetoric.

It is perhaps proper to point out that Knox's theological writings and academic sermons such as the aforementioned *Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatory, An Answer to an Anabaptist, The First Blast of the Trumpet*, or *The Appellation of John Knox*, contain the Reformer's most competent use of syllogisms, and in the latter two texts at least he consistently uses an "if / then / but / therefore" structure to delimit his premises.<sup>19</sup> But it is more revealing to examine the use of such logical forms in a context where they are least expected; for instance, in the tender and sometimes intensely private epistles to that remarkable woman, Knox's own mother-in-law, Mrs. Elizabeth Bowes. Our understanding of the relationship between these two individuals is sadly hindered by the fact that Mrs. Bowes's letters to Knox have been lost, and thus we must often indulge in the tiresome exercise of reconstruction on the basis of Knox's replies, but even this tells us much, as Daniel Frankforter has recently illustrated.<sup>20</sup> In Letter III for example, Knox discusses with Mrs. Bowes the evidence he has of his own election:

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<sup>18</sup>Janton, *L'Homme et L'Oeuvre*, p. 443.

<sup>19</sup>See Laing III, 34, 52, 342; IV, 218, 224; VI, 218.

<sup>20</sup>A. Daniel Frankforter, "The Chronology of the Knox-Bowes Letters," *Manuscripta*, XXXI, no. 1 (March, 1987), pp. 28-41.

... the office of the faithfull is to keip promiseis, but God is faithfull, *ergo*, He man keip promiseis ... let this collectioun of promissis be maid; God promissis remission of synis to all that confessis the same, but I confes my synnis for I sic the filthines thairof, and how justlie God may condemp we for my iniquities. I sob and lament for that I can not be quyt and red of syn; I desyre to leif a mair perfyte lyfe. Thir ar infallible signis, seillis and takinis, that God hes remittit the syn (Laing III, 341-2, Letter III).

There are actually two syllogisms here, closely juxtaposed. Knox evidently knew of the distinction between a preceding *prosyllogism* ("the office . . . be maid"), and a subsequent *episylogism* which stands in relation to it ("God promiseis . . . the syn"). Notably, the members of the latter are rather more loosely connected, but this is because, in the process, Knox works in a good deal of fascinating autobiographical detail.

However, judging from the remainder of the same letter, it seems that Mrs. Bowes has been writing to the Reformer when she herself was rather troubled by the belief that her union with Christ was not inviolable. In response, he assures her specifically that:

To embrace Chryst, to refus idolatrie, to confes the truth, to love the memberis of Chrystis bodie, ar the giftis of God; thairfor he can not repent that he hath maid yow partaker thairof (Laing III, 349-50, Letter III).

Although Knox makes obvious use of Romans 11:29 and 1 Corinthians 12:21 to underpin the assurance, this passage recommends itself in its own right. The reasoning process is two-step, with "thairfor" again signalling the transition from *definitio* to *conclusio*, but consider also how Knox's four-fold series of infinitive constructions ("to embrace," "to refus," "to confes," "to love") unites its elements under the banner of syntactical parallelism and simultaneously creates an effect which is incantatory as well as inculcatory.

Nor was Knox's logic exclusively confined to the syllogism. Letter XIII in the Laing collection indicates that Mrs. Bowes has written to tell him she finds herself doubting the existence of a Savior, and, like many a nascent Protestant (John Bunyan included), she has evidently become troubled by the fearful example of one Francis Spira. As Laing notes, Spira was "a lawyer of Padua whose case is well known: He died under great remorse of conscience, in consequence of having, by terror of the Inquisition, abjured the Protestant faith."<sup>21</sup> The way that Knox destroys the rather silly notions which she has built up, shows him to be a true master of dialectic art. Satan gets the blame for all things, but Knox does

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<sup>21</sup>Laing III, 367, fn. 2.

more than knock *him* on the head. Echoing 1 Peter 5:8, he tells Mrs. Bowes:

Do ye not espy ye are not within his girne, for gif ye wer, to what purpois suld he trubill yow? He is a roaring lyon, seiking whome he may devoir, whome he hes devorit alredie he seikis na mair. Befoir he trubillit yow that thair is not a Saviour and now he affirmis that ye salbe lyke to Francis Spera wha denyit Chrystis doctrine; doth not the one of theis tentations mak the uthir lie, sa that ye may espy thame baith to be leis? (Laing III, 368, Letter XIII).

W. Stanford Reid admires Knox's "mixture of scriptural principles and the hard lowland common sense that he manifested,"<sup>22</sup> but like nearly all of his biographers, Reid pays little or no attention to literary matters.

Knox, in fact, takes both of Mrs. Bowes's complaints, has a good look at them, decides (rightly) that they are mutually contradictory, and subsequently sets them against each other. In this "pincer" movement he creates *reductio ad impossibile*. Indeed, one cannot help thinking of John Bunyan's *Grace abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in which Bunyan often did something similar with apparently contradictory scriptural passages. Bunyan was forever matching them off in great imaginary controversies waged within his conscious and sub-conscious mind, until one emerged the victor and went on to form the basis of his beliefs. In Knox's passage, however, both propositions are vanquished, and with a far greater degree of composure, although it is in Mrs. Bowes's psyche, not Knox's, that the battle is being waged.

There is more variety elsewhere in the Knox canon. For instance, in his *Letter of Wholesome Counsell*, which I have already mentioned, Knox discusses the relationship between the Law and the Gospel, following Romans 7:7.

Now, if the Law which by reason of oure weakness can worke nothing but wrath and anger was so effectual that remembered and rehearsed of purpose to do it, it brought to the people a corporal benediction, what shall we say that the glorious Gospel of Christ Jesus doethe worke? (Laing IV, 134).

Knox is implicitly using argument *a fortiori*, sometimes called *ex minor ad major*, as all students of the Gospels will know,<sup>23</sup> although he avoids the standard formula involving the phrase "how much more" in favor of a dif-

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<sup>22</sup>Reid, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup>See Matthew 7:11, 10:25; Luke 11:13, 12:24, 28; Romans 11:12, 24; 1 Corinthians 6:3; Philemon 16.

ferent query, "what shall we say . . .," which again recalls St. Paul.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, there are many more examples of the "stronger reason" method in the Knox canon. It would, then, be an understatement to suggest that logic in a multiplicity of forms, was crucial to the Reformer, and that its use must have had important consequences for the recipients of his writings. Perhaps, one can sum it up like this. As a sixteenth century Reformed, evangelical Christian, Knox could not have agreed with Hamlet's Renaissance theories about the nobleness of man, but he would undoubtedly concur in saying: "He that made us with such large discourse, / looking before and after / gave us not that ability and godlike reason / to fust in us unused."<sup>25</sup>

It is occasionally suggested by literary critics that Knox's prose is devoid of imagery and that this deficiency betrays the influence of John Calvin,<sup>26</sup> but the assertion defies all the evidence. In fact, it is true neither of Knox's work nor Calvin's. Admittedly, the Scottish Reformer frequently maintained his own lack of sophistication and upheld the plainness of his words. This is deceptive (although not in a bad sense). The supreme sign of the rhetorician, after all, is the very denial of rhetoric. One would have to be remarkably naive to believe Mark Anthony when he says "I am no orator as Brutus is / But as you know me all, a plain blunt man"<sup>27</sup> or Knox himself when he writes to Mrs. Bowes "I am not a gud orator in my own caus" (see Laing II, 378, Lettter XVIII), although, astonishingly, no less a literary figure than Edwin Muir *does* seem to take the latter example seriously, even if his motives for doing so are highly questionable and profoundly misleading.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Compare Romans 3:5, 4:1, 6:1.

<sup>25</sup>*Hamlet*, IV, 4, 36-9.

<sup>26</sup>See Ronald D. S. Jack, *Scottish Prose 1550-1700* (London, 1971), p. 20.

<sup>27</sup>*Julius Caesar*, III, 2, 218-9.

<sup>28</sup>See Edwin Muir, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London, 1929), p. 49. Pierre Janton's assessment of Muir's work "If the absence of sympathy falsifies the portrait, psychologically apt remarks enlighten the behavior of Knox here and there" [editor's translation], makes the most of a book which has been called everything from a "sustained sneer" to "an extremely bad example of debunking." See James S. McEwen, *The Faith of John Knox* (London, 1961), p. ix; and Hugh MacDiarmid's essay "Knox, Calvinism and the Arts," in Hugh MacDiarmid, Campbell Maclean and Anthony Ross *John Knox* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 85.

At any rate, most of Knox's works not only contain imagery, they are replete; but it must be partially conceded that *The Historie*, in this respect, contains fewer examples. There may, however, be a case for distinguishing between Calvin's and Knox's uses. Higman has suggested that the imagery in the polemical writings of the former exists only in a rhetorical context; it has no real existence outside the text.<sup>29</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Knox's imagery, on the other hand, is based on observation and experience. In *An Exposition upon the Sixth Psalm of David Addressed to Mrs. Bowes*, he writes:

. . . even as the beames of the brycht sone perseth through the mistie and thick cloudis and bringeth doun his naturall heit, to confort and quicken suche hearbis and creaturis as, through violence of cold, wer almost fallin into deadlie decay; and thus the onlie gudness of God remaneth in all stormes, the sure fundation to the afflictit, aganis whilk the Devill is never abill to prevaile (Laing III, 147-8).

Admittedly, the images here (beams of the sun, clouds, herbs and creatures, storms, sure foundation) are subordinated to Knox's governing theological intentions, but he has produced pleasing observations nonetheless. He was, indeed, one of those preachers who could find "sermons in stones,"<sup>30</sup> and in his early *Epistle to the Congregation at St. Andrews* there is a note suggesting that his theological insights are "plesant floures" (Laing III, 12), not without cause. However, writing in *The Historie* about the "great weit and frost in Januare 1563," he introduces a passage which contains straightforward reporting, but which is strikingly similar to the above both in mood and content:

. . . upone the 20th day of Januare thair fell weit in grit abundance, quhilk in the falling freisit so vehementlie, that the earth was bot ane scheit of ysce. The foules baith grit and small freisit, and mycht not flee; monie deyit, and sum wer tackin and laid besyde the fyre, that thair fetheris mycht resolve (Laing II, 417).

One automatically thinks of those powerful lines in Henryson's *The Pre-iching of the Swallow*: "bewis bene ar bethit bair off blis / Be wickit windis off the winter wair . . . The fowlis fair, for falt thay fell off feit."<sup>31</sup> Not only do we have confirmation of Knoxian verisimilitude, but also in this in

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<sup>29</sup>Higman, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup>*As You Like it*, II, I, 17.

<sup>31</sup>See Henryson, pp. 66, 77, ll. 1701-02, 1835.

stance, and in many more, we can see that his observations in both *An Exposition* and *The Historie* stand within a Scottish literary tradition.

Usually, however, Knox's imagery is drawn from an exclusively biblical context—we can say of Knox, as St. Luke says of Apollos in *The Acts of the Apostles*, that he was "an eloquente manne and mightie in the Scripture (Acts 18:24, Great Bible)—although he often adapted the material to suit the needs and directions of his particular writings. Like all good theologians or pastors he makes the Bible relevant in any given situation. In fact, he shows a remarkable ability to unify disparate scriptural strands into a coherent whole (even before the numerical Geneva Bible made concordances really effective). Two stylistically rich passages can provide the proof of this. The first is from *A Declaration of the True Nature and Object of Prayer*, a work which perhaps has more in common with a catechism than anything else. There is, however, a clear move towards a sermonic style in the final climactic sections. The following is a splendid example of Knox's frequent apocalyptic typologies and it must represent the kind of preaching which has set him forever in the tradition of the *Boanerges*:

The multitude sall not eschape, but sall drink the dregis, and have the cupe brokin on thair heidis. For judgement begynneth in the house of the Lord and commounlie the leist offender is first punissit, to provoke the mair wickit to repentance. But, O Lord! infinit in mercie, yf thow salt puniss, mak not consummation, but cut away the proude and luxuriant branches whilk beir no frute; and preserve the commonweillis of sic as gif succour and harbour to thy contemptit messingeris, whilk lang have sufferit exyle in desert (Laing III, 105).

The opening images are particularly striking. The first sentence echoes Isaiah 51:17, but this verse says nothing about the "cup of trembling" or ("slumbering") being broken on the "heidis" of the "multitude." We may well have a joke here, but an odd one, to be sure. Knox goes on of course to cite 1 Peter 4:17-18 ("for judgement . . . repentance"), although he envisages the repentance of sinners whereas the epistle mentions only their condemnation. The third sentence shades the passage into prayer, an *imploratio*, and marks the resurgence of imagery: fruit, branches, desert, afflicted messengers. Daniel 4:14, Job 18:16, Isaiah 9:14, 18:5, Hosea 9:16, Luke 3:9, 13:9, John 15:2 and 2 Chronicles 13:16, seem to have been at least some of his likely models.

My second example is from Letter XX, to Mrs. Bowes:

Abde, Mother, the tyme of harvest, befor whilk must neidis goe the cald of winter, the temperat and unstabill spring, and the fervent heit of summer; to be plane, ye must neidis sow with tearis or ye reap with gladness; syn must in yow ga

befoir justice, deth befor lyfe, weaknes befor strength, untabillnes before stabilitie and bitterness before comfort (Laing III, 385, Letter XX).

If our previous example was consonant with the picture of Knox as a fire-breathing, pulpit-dinging Son of Thunder, this represents the other end of the spectrum. It is perhaps one of the gentlest expressions of the Christian message we encounter in Knox's prose. The "tyme of harvest" most probably echoes Matthew 13:30, although it occurs at least half a dozen times in the Old Testament (see Joshua 3:15, Judges 15:1, 2 Samuel 23:13, Proverbs 25:13, Jeremiah 50:16, 51:33). We may indeed have a veiled apocalyptic reference, since in the Parable of the Tares, where it occurs, it represents "the ende of the worlde" (Matthew 13:39). But the use of highly figurative language drawn from the cycle of the seasons, in conjunction with the antithetical structure, seems also to recall Genesis 8:22 ("Nether shall sowynge tyme and harvest, colde and heate, sommer and wynter, day and night ceasse so longe as the earthe endureth"), Psalms 126:5 ("They that sowe in teeres shal reepe in ioye") and 1 Corinthians 15:43 ("It is sowne in corruption and shal ryse in incorruption, it is sowne in dishonoure and shal ryse in glory, it is sowne in weakness and shal ryse in power" (Coverdale)). It may have been passages like this, more than any in *The Historie*, that Thomas Carlyle had in mind when he said of Knox: "it must be a little mind that cannot see that he was a poet—one of the wild Saxon kind, full of deep religious melody, . . ." <sup>32</sup> The images, for all their poetic antecedents, may have had a subliminal effect on Mrs. Bowes, in spite of her well-known pessimism, and we should not forget that Knox wrote solely for the purpose of comforting her troubled spirit.

In my final section, which deals with source material, Knox's use of the Bible is also highly relevant, although other influences are sometimes more fascinating. We can see two differing strands coming together in what was apparently his first sermon, preached at St. Andrews shortly before the disputation with Arbuckle. His text, significantly enough, was from the prophet Daniel 7:24-25, and he was still teaching on this book when the young James Melvill saw him on that famous occasion twenty-four years later. <sup>33</sup> Knox combined Old Testament prophecy with Revelation 13:5 (and both passages were later to be heavily annotated in the Geneva Bible) to produce the following radical rejection of papal authority:

<sup>32</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Lectures on the History of Literature* (London, 1892), p. 157.

<sup>33</sup>*The Autobiography and Diary of Mr. James Melvill*, ed. Robert Pitcairn (Edinburgh, 1842), p. 26.



... he willed men to consider yf these notes, "Thare shall ane arise unlyk to the other, heaving a mouth speaking great thinges and blasphemous," could be applied to any other but to the Pape and his kingdome; for "yf these, (said he) be not great woordis and blasphemous, 'the Successor of Petir,' 'the Vicare of Christ,' 'the Head of the Kirk,' 'most holy,' 'most blessed' . . . yea, 'that hes power of all, and none power of him:' Nay, 'not to say that he dois wrong' . . . yf these, (said he) and many other, able to be schawin in his awin Canone Law, be not great and blasphemous woordis, and such as never mortall man spak befor, let the world judge (Laing I, 191).

The relationship between this sermon and Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Dialog betwix Experience and ane Courtiour* has been noted from time to time, although different conclusions have been drawn. In "Sir David Lindsay, Reformer," an article in *The Innes Review* of 1950, Brother Kenneth states one recognized fact, "that the general resemblance is too close to be accidental."<sup>34</sup> Lindsay, of course, was present in the Castle at the time, and in fact seems to have been instrumental, together with Henry Balnaves and John Rough, in imposing the vocation to preach on Knox (see Laing I, 186). In a highly readable but also severely criticized study *John Knox in Controversy*, Hugh Watt posits two things about the sermon; that Knox ultimately inspired part of Lindsay's poem and that the particular juxtaposition of *Daniel* and *Revelation* produced a reading of history which was unique to Knox at that time.<sup>35</sup> Both of these statements have been challenged. Brother Kenneth suggests that "it is more likely that the scholar and the humanist presiding at the Council suggested a line of thought to the diffident young preacher."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, one cannot rule out such a possibility but Knox offers no evidence to suggest that he consulted Lindsay, or the others.

We can make more of Watt's second point. In her thesis *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain*, Katharine R. Firth suggests that Knox may have had George Joye's *The Expositioun of Daniel the Prophete gathered out of Philip Melancthon, Johan Ecolampadius, Chonrade Pelliscane, and out of John Draconite* (1545), a translation of Luther's *De Antichristo*,<sup>37</sup> and that their combination produced the reading. This would

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<sup>34</sup>Brother Kenneth, "Sir David Lindsay, Reformer," *Innes Review*, I (1950), 80.

<sup>35</sup>Hugh Watt, *John Knox in Controversy* (London, 1950), p. 13.

<sup>36</sup>See *Innes Review*, I (1950), 80, fn. 6.

<sup>37</sup>Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 116-7.

mean that texts such as Melanchthon's *In Danielam Prophetam Commentarius* or Oecolampadius's *Commentariorum in Prophetam* ultimately lie behind Knox's. Nor should we rule out *Chronicon Carionis Expositum et auctum multis et re teribus et recentibus historiis* . . . (1532), by John Carion, in the original or a German version, although it is still too early for the English translation by Walter Lynne. Indeed, by his own admission, Knox was relying on an "originall whare my testimonyes ar written" and he only offers to prove "that the wrettaris ment as I have spokin" (Laing I, 192).

In places, the sermon itself draws heavily from the *ius canonicum* of orthodox Catholicism (and it is in this respect that the resemblance to Lindsay's poem is closest).<sup>38</sup> This kind of knowledge of course is frequently evident in Knox's prose. One of his most infamous sentences: "And so thei departed, without *Requiem aeternam* and *Requiescant in pace*, song for his saule" (Laing I, 178) echoes the *Officium Defunctorum*. In the sermon, however, Knox is alluding to such common papal titles as *Romanus Pontifex Sanctissimus*, *Sanctissimus Dominis Noster* and *Servus Servorum Dei*, and after listing some of these in translation he introduces a "yea" then a "nay" section, perhaps after the fashion of Matthew 5:37: "your communicacioun shalbe, yee, yee: nay nay. For whatsoever is more then that, commeth of euil" (Coverdale, see also 2 Corinthians 1:17-20).

Interesting source material surfaces not only in Knox's sermons but in his narratives. First of all, we should read the witty comments about Cardinal Beaton and his Castle stronghold with 1 Corinthians 3:19 (or Job 5:13) in mind: "He compasseth the wyse in their craftyness" (Coverdale):

And thare he [the Cardinal] remaned without all fear of death, promissing unto him self no less pleasur, nor did the riche man, of whome mentioun is maid by our Maister in the Evangell; for he did not onlie rejois and say, "Eitt and be glade, my Saule, for thou hast great riches laid up in store for many dayis," Bot also he said, "Tush, a feg for the fead and a buttoun for the braggynne of all the heretikis and thare assistance in Scotland" (Laing I, 173).

This remarkable passage involves a more sophisticated use of the Scots language, of rhetoric and of the Bible than anywhere else in Knox's writings. Obviously, the central quotation is from the "Parable of the Rich Fool" (Luke 12:16-20). Just as Shakespeare uses the character of Falstaff and the "Parable of Dives and Lazarus" to create comedy, Knox could do something similar. Knox, however, probably had more than one model in mind, and the second is perhaps less obvious to us than it was to his contemporaries. The Cardinal sounds much like the unrepentant children of

<sup>38</sup>See *The Poems of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount*, ed. Douglas Hamer (Edinburgh and London, 1937), I, 325.

Judah in Jeremiah 5:11-31, who are subsequently punished by God. This long section, incidentally, makes use of the "fig" image. In Miles Coverdale's version of 1535, the passage which corresponds to verse (11) in the King James Bible reads "Tush, there shall no misfortune come upon us."

More than this, however, I suggest that the "Beaton-narrative" contains a partial redaction of material which Knox had written nearly fifteen years before he composed Book I of *The Historie*. In the "Knox-Papers," unknown to Laing and collected by Peter Lorimer in the 1870's, the letter *John Knox to the Congregation of Berwick* (ca. 1552) includes what must be a literary embryo of the above passage, and allows us to reconstruct something of its genesis. Originally, it seems, Knox combined Jeremiah 5:11-13, Isaiah 5:19 and 1 Thessalonians 5:3:

In this most feirfull prayer of the propheet wer his eyes oppined that he assuredly saw all these plagues which short after apprehended this obstinate nation, albeit in the meane season with contempt they cried, "Tush, their words be but wynde. Latt the counsell of the Holy One of Israel cum to pass. We shall have peace and wealth in our dayes, for we are the people yet call upon the Lorde. His law and holie temple are with us" By these meanes did this sinful nation persuade themselves to rest, peace and tranquillitie, when suddane destruction approached at hand (Lorimer p. 237).

Given what we know about Knox's writing, this letter is self-authenticating, and Lorimer is right when he says that its "genuineness . . . does not admit of doubt. It bears the strong impress, throughout, of his well-known style, both of thought and language."<sup>39</sup> The Isaiah reference, it seems, did not survive the transition from early letter to later narrative, probably because it implied self-righteousness. Knox no doubt felt that the Cardinal did not even make the pretence of piety. One lexical item which both texts share, however, is the tell-tale interjection "Tush(e)." The word no longer survives in the Bible as we now have it, having apparently been edited out for the version of 1611. The literary effect of its use is rather important. In English and Scottish literature it often aids the process of characterization, suggesting silliness and arrogance.

One can read in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, "Tush, said Obstinate, away with your book."<sup>40</sup> In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the vain and stupid

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<sup>39</sup>Peter Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England* (London, 1875), p. 265.

<sup>40</sup>John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 42.

Roderigo opens the play by saying "Tush, never tell me! . . . that thou, Iago . . ." <sup>41</sup> As we saw earlier, even the "gossop" in William Arth's narrative says "Tush" (Laing I, 39). As a leitmotif it also suggests the imminence of disaster, rather like the laughing of the irresponsible birds in Henryson's fables. More importantly, in David Lindsay's *Tragedie of the Cardinall*, which Knox seems to have read, Beaton says "than leuch I . . ."

A subsequent phrase used by Knox, "a feg for the fead and a buttoune for the braggynne," draws heavily on alliterative traditions and utilize some standard symbols of worthlessness, but Cardinal Beaton is no more likely to have said this than Napoleon is "Not tonight, Josephine." Knox's intention is obviously to stimulate hubris. In her *Cardinal of Scotland*, Margaret Sanderson has written well on this point: "Knox was preaching a sermon with the Cardinal as object lesson, to accentuate his self-reliance made his fall all the more salutary." <sup>42</sup> As in Lindsay's poem, the fall-of-princes tradition must also have been in Knox's mind, and I hope I have illustrated how a knowledge of his literary methodology makes his motivation a lot clearer.

As my final contribution, I should like to say something about the influence of other histories on Knox's. When Knox composed his major work, a Scottish historiographical tradition was already well developed and we should think primarily of texts such as Boece's *Scotorum Historiae* and Bellenden's or the "Mar Lodge" translation of it. Knox of course was much more specific than these authors in his choice of period, but there is one narrative which they all share: the martyrdom of the Bohemian physician, Pavel Kraver (or Paul Craw).

One of Knox's sources for his own version of this material was Boece. Knox says that Craw was "deprehended in the Universitie of Sanctandrose" in 1431 (Laing I, 6). The other vernacular versions mention simply that he was "tane" or "taken." <sup>43</sup> Only Boece has "deprehensus." <sup>44</sup> The surface

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<sup>41</sup>*Othello*, I, 1, 1-2.

<sup>42</sup>Margaret H. B. Sanderson, *Cardinal of Scotland: David Beaton (c. 1494-1546)* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 224.

<sup>43</sup>See John Bellenden, *The Chronicles of Scotland*, eds. Edith C. Batho and H. W. Husbands (Edinburgh and London, 1941), II, 393-4. See also *The "Mar Lodge" Translation of the History of Scotland*, ed. George Watson (Edinburgh and London, 1946). A large part of this text is still unpublished. The relevant material belongs to folio 365<sup>r</sup>, (unpublished section), and I am indebted to Mr. H. Watson of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* for providing me with a copy of the MS.

<sup>44</sup>Hector Boece, *Scotorum Historiae a prima gentis origine, cum aliarum et rerum et*

structure similarity in the lexical choice of Boece and Knox is particularly striking,<sup>45</sup> too striking to be coincidental. Moreover, we should remember that in Scots, "deprehended" nearly always had negative connotations, as it does in its original Latin form. These connotations, however, simply do not fit in the "Craw narrative" as it exists in Knox's *Historie*. This, perhaps, is why W. Croft Dickinson saw fit to gloss the word as "apprehended," which is positive and non-pejorative.<sup>46</sup> In a certain sense, "apprehended" is an antonym of "deprehended." They do not mean the same thing at all. For Boece, Craw was a heretic and therefore culpable, but Knox had no such reservations. To him, the Bohemian was a glorious martyr. We must either change the deep structure of "deprehended," as Dickinson has done, or admit that Knox has stayed too close to a source and produced one of his occasional inconsistencies. And there are other, perhaps more significant, similarities between Boece and Knox, notably in the descriptions of celestial prodigies<sup>47</sup> and their significance. One cannot afford to overlook such connections.

But it seems that one of the most alarming oversights in the recent literary criticism of Knox is its continuing failure to mention the influence of the contemporary German historian, John Sleidan; author of a Latin history entitled *Commentariorum de Statu Religionis et Reipublicae, Carolo Quinto, Caesare* (1555). Even Knox's own biographers seldom mention the German. All in all, this connection, which is of paramount importance, has been passed over by such writers as C.S. Lewis, R.D.S. Jack, Jasper Ridley, W. Stanford Reid and even W.C. Dickinson. Knox's knowledge of other less important continental histories, namely Johannes Thurmayr's *Annalium Boiorum libri septem*, which he quotes in his *Answer to Tyrie the Jesuit* (see Laing VI, 505-6), is occasionally mentioned,<sup>48</sup> but Sleidan's importance is still underestimated. Theologians will perhaps know that Knox even translated a large section of Sleidan's history for inclusion in his own *An Answer to an Anabaptist*. Moreover, it was evidently

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*gentium illustratione non vulgari* (Paris, 1575), Liber XVII, folio 352<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>45</sup>DOST, II, 81.

<sup>46</sup>The *History of the Reformation of Religion in the Realm of Scotland*, ed. W. Croft Dickinson (London, 1949), I, 7, fn. 4.

<sup>47</sup>See for example Laing I, 255 and *Scotorum Historiae*, Liber X, folio 200<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>48</sup>See Charles P. Finlayson, "A Volume Associated with John Knox," *Scottish Historical Review*, 38 (1959), 170-72. See also James Kirk, "The Scottish Reformation and Reign of James VI: A Select Critical Bibliography," in *The Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 23, Part 1 (1987), 138.

Sleidan who gave Knox the idea of substantiating his points by including copious documentation in *The Historie*, and in my own research I have explored the relationship between the two writers in some detail. But one especially pronounced instance of it will suffice here. The following is from Sleidan's *praefatio*, juxtaposed with a seventeenth century translation by Edmund Bohun:

Bellicas autem res, &  
quicquid est eius modi,  
non quidem omitto, neque  
sane potui; sed tamen ex  
professo non sumpti  
tractandis. Nam vt paulo  
supra dixi, causae religionis  
hic est potiffimum dedicatus  
labor itaque Lectorem,  
quum ad id genus loca  
peruenit, admonitum esse  
volo, ne prolixiorem  
aliquam narrationem expectet:  
nec enim instituti me fuit,  
& ex aliorum libris qui sibi  
partem hanc Scribendi  
sumpserunt, haurire licebit  
quicquid in eo  
desiderabitur . . . .<sup>49</sup>

As to Military actions,  
of what pass'd in the  
wars, I have not wholly  
pass'd them over, nor  
indeed could I, and yet I  
have not made them any  
principall part of my  
bussiness, because that  
of Religion was my main  
design. And therefore  
when my Reader falls  
upon any thing of that  
beforehand, he is not to  
expect an exact and large  
account. That being  
contrary to my  
undertaking, and which  
may easily be found in  
other Authors who have  
made those things their  
principal care, tho I  
have not . . . .<sup>50</sup>

We can be fairly sure that the text on the left was Knox's model when he wrote in his *Historie*:

And yit in the begynning, mon we crave of all the gentill Readaris, not to look of us such ane History as shall expresse all thingis that have occurred within this Realme, during the tyme of this terrible conflict that hes bene betwix the Sanctes of God and these bloody wolves who clame to thame selves the titill of clargie, and to have authority ower the saules of men, for with Pollicey mynd we to

<sup>49</sup>Johannes Sleidani [John Sleidan], *Commentariorum de Statu religionis et Reipublicae, Carolo Quinto Caesare* (Paris, 1559), folio Aiiij<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>50</sup>Edmund Bohun, *A General History of the Reformation of the Church from the errors and corruptions of the Church of Rome begun in Germany by Martin Luther, with the progress thereof in all parts of Christendom from the year 1517, to the year 1556. Written in Latin by John Sleidan and "Faithfully Englished"* (London, 1689), p. 2.

medill no further then it hath religioun mixed with it. And thairfor albeit that many thingis wer done be omitted, yitt, yf we invent no leyis, we think our selves blameless in that behalf (Laing I, 5).

To be sure, there are as many differences as there are similarities. For example, even while denying his interest in military matters, Knox conceives of a great battle, a "conflict." He adds too, what R.S. Walker calls "a prevalent asperity"<sup>51</sup> in his use of phrases such as "bloody wolves." But the general similarities are surely clear. All of the passages are apologetic in tone and face up to the fact that they are attempting a historically selective method of approach which may not fully tally with the preconceptions of the readers. Knox's claim to absolute truth also finds aesthetic parallels in Sleidan and has, of course, been challenged (very properly). We do not value Knox for objectivity. But where Sleidan is cool, it is the very intensity of Knox's commitment that fires his own *Historie*, and makes it a literary masterpiece, albeit a tragically flawed one. Knox is forever controversial, but it is perhaps time that literary critics stopped just reacting to him, or writing him off to save themselves some effort, and started thinking about him. I hope that I have illustrated some of the ways in which this can be done.

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<sup>51</sup>John Knox, *The Historie of the Reformatioun*, ed. Ralph S. Walker (Edinburgh, 1940), p. 6.